

## DEVELOPING PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES FOR PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION :

### SOME CONSIDERATIONS

The prevalence of digital media in the profession of photography has begun to impair documentation of the built heritage.

In assigning a documentation project, the client can be expected to specify, in more or less detail depending on the scope of the task

1. the content ie provide a shot list
2. the medium to be employed in capturing the image and in transmitting it to the client for review and for archival storage

Generally the photographic image may exist in one of three forms : a working form, a presentation form, or an archival form, each of which may be created in a variety of media and stored by a variety of means.

When the task is the documentation of the built heritage, and therefore the archival form is to be prioritized, what is the preferred protocol?

Archival standards remain a difficulty in digital imaging.

At present there is no standard for digital negatives.

All raw image captures are viewed in a lossy format. The procedure by which the raw image is converted to a digital negative is not standardized. The DNG format is the most commonly used and accessible, but there is no non-proprietary standard for the digital negative.

A typical project employing digital techniques would see the client receive a number of DNG files, supplemented with high resolution JPEGs of the same files, for the client's viewing convenience -- since the JPEGs are smaller files and quicker to open with commonly available viewers, it is easier to make prints from them etc. In addition a selection from among the images may be inkjet printed on an archival paper with archival inks. These prints, properly stored, are allegedly good for 75 years, and probably more.

This is much better than the life of most of the available media for digital file storage. Delkin makes optical disks for which they claim a 100 year life (for DVDs ) and 300 for CDs.

Flash memory is uncertain because the electronics built into the drive to access the memory are of unknown longevity. One can use a card and a reader to separate memory and access, but then the reader, like all electronic devices, may become obsolete and scarce.

Similarly uncertain over the long term are hard disk drives. Best practice is probably to download the drive, reformat, and reload every 2-5 years.

At this point, photographic film begins to seem preferable. The gelatin silver negative, properly prepared, remains the most lasting medium for the storage of photographic images that we know of.

Gelatin silver prints on paper, properly prepared, may be at least as durable as the negative. Alternatively, film negatives can be scanned to produce a digital file, and thence paper prints. Scanners will continue to evanesce, of course, but it seems very likely that a scanning device of some sort ie some species of optical sensor, will always be with us.

Therefore, an analog storage medium, which can be coupled with a digital scanner would appear to be the optimum solution for the production of archival images.

Since it is necessary for the client to engage a photographer equipped to light the subject and expose the film, as well as prepare the prints, documentation by film photography may be more expensive than digital in the short run. But when one considers that any repository to which the archival image may be delivered is almost certain to have proper storage facilities for the film negatives it already holds, the ongoing costs of maintaining the image will probably be much less compared to those for maintaining a collection of digital image files. These have to be continually rotated over new devices as the equipment with which they can be viewed becomes obsolete.

There is another possible answer, but it is institutional. At present, large organizations can be expected to employ in-house or outside digital backup and storage services. If their holder were to upload the documentary images to their backup services, then these would be maintained along with the rest of the files. This is probably the most reliable digital archival solution at present, but it depends on a constant recycling of the files to ensure continued accessibility. Moreover, data storage services whether on or off premise must still be actively managed, which is an ongoing cost. These large files are competing for space, which is also a cost. Unless the client very soon after taking delivery of the documentation forwards it to an archives proper, other uses of the space may trump the maintenance of the images.

Taken together, the above considerations suggest that the specification of photographic documentation might include

1. a list of the views required, and a requirement that there be no perspectival distortion of the image
2. stipulation of working, presentation and archival media to be employed
3. stipulation that the archival media should include one or more of :
  - colour prints made from high resolution digital images on archival paper with archival inks
  - Black and white silver gelatin film negatives of a specified size eg 4x5 film, shot with a camera capable of perspective control
  - Black and white contact prints or prints made from high resolution digital scans of the negative

To my knowledge there is at present no Canadian equivalent to the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey program of the U.S. National Park Service. Accordingly, this remains the most detailed set of guidelines and standards for documentation of the built heritage to which we can refer. The latest iteration (Nov 2011) of the HABS/HAER/HALS standards for photographic documentation retains film, and lists no digital

alternative or equivalent to the film image for archival recording purposes.

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